Flashbacks

Tio Diego was an old man by now. The countless years he spent outdoors, tending flocks of sheep, had turned his face and hands into tough, worn brown leather. His once sharp, piercing black eyes were now glazed with the beginnings of cataracts. Diego's hearty laugh never diminished, even though he was missing several teeth.

Bob stopped to see his dear uncle, even as the stress of family and work limited their time together. Since his return from Korea's gut retching hell, Bob had trouble relating to family and friends. He was no longer the hometown boy they knew. Bob's mind had trouble focusing. Sounds, smells and images would trigger some element of terror he had experienced overseas. Bob was trying hard to return to a calm, happy life.

Diego was always happy to see the boy. He had carried him in his arms, years ago to Trinidad, at the behest of his mother and sister, but Diego kept Bobby's origins secret while Frank Vallejos was alive.

Bob was welcomed into his tiny 3 room, wood frame house. Diego gestured to the big, upholstered chair, as he wobbled over to the fridge and retrieved 2 ice cold cokes. He popped off the bottle caps with a church key and carried the drinks over to his guest. Handing one to Bob he then gave his hair an affectionate tussle. Diego's own hair was thick, soft and snow white.

Bob's long, lanky frame settled deeper into the overstuffed chair. Diego perched on a nearby padded stool. They laughed and droned on about their early adventures together. One of them let go with a loud, gassy fart. Both men swallowed the sudden silence, then burst out with howls of laughter. Their wrinkled noses and hand waving dispelling the noxious fumes. Diego took the moment to remind his young nephew of the day 'coyotito' had to retrieve his rooster from the shit house.

"That damn bird pecked and scratched the hell outta me!' Bob retorted.

"Because you teased him and threw rocks at him!" Diego scolded, "Then tossed him down the crapper!"

"Well…but that…ha! That wasn't the only time I was full of shit!" Bob laughed.

"Oh?" Diego sat up straighter on the stool.

Bob looked down at his hands, and rubbed over the tattoo of Jackie…

"When we were at Camp Chitosi in Japan, some buddies and I wanted to get something to eat at this hoochie house that was off limits to us GI's. We were piggin out and havin a good time with the bar flies. Then one of the guys came through the front door and hollered the MP's were coming!"

"The guys and me lit out the back hallway: elbows and armpits!" Diego chuckled as he watched Bobby frail his long arms and legs. "But just like you taught me…while everybody zigs… you zag!"

Bob shook his head and took a deep breath. "I plowed through one of them rice-paper screen doors and fell into a pit of sewage!" Diego hooted in laughter, clapping his hands together.

"So much for indoor plumbing." Bob laughed, "I didn't get caught, but man it was a long, stinky slog back to the barracks!"

The two men barraged each other with funny stories. Tio Diego stretched and gazed up into his memories. He reminded Bobby of the early spring chaos of a sudden storm, where he and young coyotito were caught in a fast-moving blizzard.

Bob's pulse quickened. Diego recalled the cold, bitter winds. *Bob's body tensed*. Diego's voice became muted and distant, while Bob's mind was transported into the frozen huts of North Korea. *Bob shivered as his eyes glazed over*. A numbing switch tripped within his brain. As Diego recalled the necessity of gutting an old ewe for them the stay warm – Bob flashed back to the horrors of his POW treatment, by the North Koreans and Russians. The starvation, rape and torture he endured paled in comparison to the inhumane lengths he went to survive. As his buddies around him succumbed to the cold, SFC Vallejos would fight other POWs for their still warm bodies; to disembowel the corpse and envelope himself to stave off his own looming death.

Muted sobs surprised the old man. Tio Diego slowly rose from the stool and went over to his nephew. He reached out and grasped the young man's trembling shoulder.

"Stay with us, Coyote, we are here to help you."

Bob reached up and held onto his uncle's hand, but he could not stop his gut retching sobs.

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This was Robert's biggest handicap to a normal life. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) could hit him at any time.

"See, the way the flashback works, something happens out there (noise, flash, smell) that kinda trips me back. You get kind of a hot flash, and you begin to see the enemy. All (Nellie) had to do was look at my eyes and she would know."

He and Nellie together devised a rope/leather thong handcuff she could wrap around his hands and pull tight.

"Of course, some of my kids saw this, and being as young as they were, would listen to grandma and grandpa tell them 'I was crazy, (and trying to) kill their mother'.

Oldest daughter Cathy remembers her dad, during one of his "fits", had turned over the dining room table and was crouched behind it tossing teacups like hand grenades. Nellie had ushered the kids outside and had them hide among the bedsheets on the clothesline. She paced nervously outside, listening to her husband ransack the house.

Robert's parents were also afraid of his night terrors, and hair trigger temper, to the point they tried to have him committed to an asylum.

"I had to run (to Fort Lyons) for my life, cause it was during the time my parents wanted to put me in the insane asylum in Pueblo, CO. Cause they would hear my nightmares (and figure) he's crazy. They were afraid of me. (But) I beat um to the punch; I went to the VA hospital in Fort Lyons (and gave my POW statement.)"

This was likely the timeframe Robert was prescribed medications, such as 'Meprobamate' which is a class of tranquilizer that can tamp down the effect of an oncoming PTSD episode. Over the years the medication changed to the current flavor of the decade; (ie; Valium used in the 60's and 70's, and Trazadone from the 1980's onward).

"All (soldiers) that volunteer for that type of duty are gonna be classified as schizophrenic (and delusional)… with a flattened affect, which tells um that you are dangerous. (So) if you <u>ever</u> start talkin about (classified information), they can say he's skitzo, don't pay attention to him."

Employers in civilian life were made aware of the potential liability an ex-soldier may become to their business. Codes on soldiers DD-214 were used to define the man's character flaws.

"(I've lost contracts, when) my insurance policy (was cancelled) because I was a 'paranoid schizophrenic,' with a flattened affect. Well, I took the training for it. A lot of the veterans that come back that were commandos, they knew all of this killing stuff. It was taught to them."

<u>No wonder Robert wanted to have his own business.</u>